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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT FACES TOUGHEST TEST AS VIOLENT PROTESTS ROCK
DHAKA

1. (SBU) Summary: Bangladesh's eight-month caretaker government is facing its severest political test yet after student protests at Dhaka University spilled into the capital's streets on August 21. If mishandled, the protests threaten to weaken the caretaker government and could tarnish the reputation of the army, which justified its intervention in January by promising to rescue the nation from the bloodshed and street riots then wracking the country. Yet to be seen is whether the return of unrest will affect the election timetable previously announced by the government or affect Chief of Army Staff General Moeen U. Ahmed's standing within the army. End Summary.

2. (U) A scuffle between soldiers and students watching a soccer match at Dhaka University on August 20 quickly escalated into campus-wide pitched battles between police and students. On August 21, students burned an effigy of Moeen, who is widely seen as the power behind the civilian caretaker government that cancelled elections last January and imposed restrictions on civil liberties in the name of cleaning up politics and fighting endemic corruption. According to press reports, more than 100 students and faculty were injured as police fired rubber bullets and fired shells of teargas. Dhaka University students called an indefinite strike that quickly won faculty support.

3. (U) Unrest flared again at Dhaka University on August 21 and quickly spread to other campuses and the streets of the capital. Television news showed scenes of protesters throwing stones at police clad in riot gear and of slogan-chanting women marching through the capital. Among the chants was "Ek Dofa Ek Daabi, Moeen Tui Kobe Jabi" (One Point, One Demand: Get out Moeen). One local reporter said students torched or damaged more than 100 vehicles, including an army jeep, in central Dhaka. Clashes between police and students were reported at Jagannath University in old Dhaka and at Jahangirnagar University 20 miles northwest of Dhaka. There are also reports of clashes outside the capital, including in Chittagong and Jessore.

4. (U) In an attempt to diffuse the situation, the army said it would agree to student demands to investigate the August 20 incident and consider withdrawing troops deployed at Dhaka University since December, according to local media. There was no immediate indication, however, that protesting students were mollified. As of 0900 GMT August 21 neither General Moeen nor Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed of the caretaker government had commented publicly on the unrest. Neither had leaders of the two main political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

5. (U) It is no surprise that the unrest broke out at Dhaka University, which traditionally has been at the vanguard of political activism in Bangladesh; for example, students there initiated a movement that eventually toppled military leader Hossain

Mohammad Ershad in 1990. More recently, many Dhaka University students have been rabid supporters of the AL and BNP and have been particularly frustrated by the caretaker government's ban on political activity and its jailing of many of both parties' top leaders on corruption allegations. Included in the arrests that followed January 11 were many senior student political leaders.

¶6. (SBU) The caretaker government also is facing discontent within the broader population over rising prices, energy shortages and a perceived lackluster response to flooding that has devastated wide swaths of the country. The unrest also is likely to undermine one area in which the caretaker government has received generally positive reviews, its ability to maintain law and order in a society often brought to a standstill by strikes and politically inspired street fighting.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: The ongoing protests come at a particularly bad time for the caretaker government and its military backers. The unrest threatens to undermine public support for the government, which is based largely on its ability to maintain law and order. It also could embolden supporters of the two main political parties, which have been the major targets of the drive to sweep endemic corruption from society, to confront the government. How the protests might affect the government's recently announced political liberalization plans that are to culminate in a national election late next year is unclear. What is clear, however, is that the unrest will feed the frenetic speculation about possible upcoming changes in the government, including those that would increase the profile of Moeen and the military. End comment.

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